

ILO - International Labour Organization

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) in the Workforce

Introduction

The 21st century has brought increasingly diverse workplaces, driven by globalization, economic changes, and societal pressures. As the pool of workers becomes more diverse, it is paramount that everyone has the means to productively contribute, without the fear of discrimination or barriers. Discrimination and barriers may include racial or gender bias, unequal pay, or unjust hiring practices. For example, the UN reports that the global gender pay gap persists at approximately 77 cents earned by women for every dollar earned by men. The ILO has also shown that persons with disabilities experience disproportionately lower labour-force participation and higher unemployment rates worldwide.¹ Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in the workforce serves as an overarching term for initiatives that seek to remove these barriers and prevent discrimination in the workforce. These controversial initiatives aim to make workplaces more inclusive and thus more productive, but their efficacy and adoption is debated.

International Labour Organization

The International Labour Organization (ILO), founded in 1919 as part of the Treaty of Versailles, aims to promote labour and human rights to United Nations (UN) member states.² The ILO achieves this through working with employers, employees, and governments to address inequality. Over the decades, the ILO has established standards that call for fair pay, equal opportunities, and the elimination of all forms of bias that affect hiring, promotion, and workplace treatment. Beyond establishing standards, the ILO actively supports member states through research, policy guidance, and collaboration.

¹ Valentina Stoevska, "New ILO Database Highlights Labour Market Challenges of Persons with Disabilities," June 13, 2022, <https://ilostat.ilo.org/new-ilo-database-highlights-labour-market-challenges-of-persons-with-disabilities/>.

² ILO, "History of the ILO," International Labour Organization, January 28, 2024, <https://www.ilo.org/about-ilo/history-ilo>.

Contributing Factors to Inequality

Workplace inequality is thought to emerge from a complex combination of historical, structural, and sociocultural forces. Historically, women, racial minorities, and marginalized populations have been concentrated in informal or lower-wage sectors, creating long-term disparities.³ Present-day inequalities are further reinforced by unconscious bias, discriminatory hiring practices, unequal caregiving responsibilities, and limited access to education. Research indicates that implicit bias contributes to undervaluing the capacities of certain groups, such as persons with disabilities, whose abilities are often underestimated.⁴ In many contexts, workplace cultures discourage reporting discrimination, and the absence of inclusive policies prevents diverse talent from advancing. These factors have led many to believe that workplaces lacking inclusion prevent people from succeeding and supporting themselves.

History of Workplace Equality

Adopted in the post-war era, the Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) stands as a foundational pillar in the evolution of workplace equality by formally establishing the international standard of "equal remuneration for men and women workers for work of equal value".⁵ The Convention's significance lies in its sophisticated approach to equity; rather than simply mandating equal pay for identical jobs, it introduced the concept of "objective appraisal of jobs" to ensure that wage differentials are based on the actual work performed rather than gender bias. Furthermore, it defined remuneration broadly to include not just the basic wage, but any additional emoluments payable in cash or kind, preventing employers from hiding discriminatory practices in non-salary benefits. By obligating member

³ Paloma Carrillo et al., "What Labour Income Reveals about Gender Inequalities at Work," November 11, 2025, <https://ilostat.ilo.org/what-labour-income-reveals-about-gender-inequalities-at-work/>; Stoevska, "New ILO Database Highlights Labour Market Challenges of Persons with Disabilities."

⁴ Deborah Carr and Eun Ha Namkung, "Physical Disability at Work: How Functional Limitation Affects Perceived Discrimination and Interpersonal Relationships in the Workplace," *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* 62, no. 4 (2021): 545–561, <https://doi.org/10.1177/00221465211023424>.

⁵ ILO, "Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100)," International Labour Office, 1951, <https://www.ilo.org/media/325496/download>.

states to collaborate with employers' and workers' organizations to implement these standards through national laws or collective agreements, Convention No. 100 provided the early legal architecture for dismantling systemic economic discrimination based on sex.

Seven years after addressing equal pay, the ILO fundamentally expanded the scope of workplace rights with the Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111), which remains the most comprehensive international instrument dedicated to fundamental equity in the labor market. Its historical significance lies in its holistic definition of "discrimination," which it codified as any distinction, exclusion, or preference based on seven protected grounds, race, colour, sex, religion, political opinion, national extraction, or social origin, that impairs equality of opportunity. Unlike its predecessor, Convention No. 111 extends beyond remuneration to cover the entire employment cycle, including access to vocational training, recruitment, and terms of employment. By obligating member states to declare and pursue a proactive "national policy" to eliminate discrimination rather than merely prohibiting specific acts, it shifted the burden from individual redress to systemic reform. Furthermore, it introduced the crucial legal distinction that exclusions based on the "inherent requirements" of a job do not constitute discrimination, thereby balancing the principles of merit and equity in the modern workforce.⁶

In the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ILO shifted its focus from establishing fundamental rights to actively dismantling structural barriers with the adoption of the resolution concerning inequalities and the world of work. This document is historically significant for marking a transition in the DEI framework from "equal opportunity" to "outcome-based resilience," explicitly recognizing that global crises, such as pandemics and climate change, do not affect all workers equally but rather deepen pre-existing fissures. The resolution highlights that despite decades of legal protections, "persistent and pervasive" inequalities remain, particularly for women who disproportionately shoulder unpaid care work

⁶ ILO, "Convention No. 111 Convention Concerning Discrimination in Respect of Employment and Occupation," 1958, <https://www.ilo.org/media/27816/download>.

and for workers in the informal economy who lack social protection. By calling for a "comprehensive and integrated strategy" that includes adequate minimum wages, universal social protection, and fair trade practices, the document reframes workplace equality not just as a human rights issue, but as a critical economic necessity for sustainable recovery and global stability.⁷

The origins of DEI as a specific term are rooted in the legal and social movements of the mid-20th century, evolving from compliance to a holistic business strategy.⁸ The concept began in the 1960s with the Civil Rights Movement, where United States President John F. Kennedy's executive order first introduced the term "affirmative action" to address racial bias in government hiring, followed by President Lyndon B. Johnson's Civil Rights Act which legally banned employment discrimination based on race, religion, sex, and national origin. By the 1980s, the scope of these efforts expanded significantly to include gender, driven by the Feminist Movement, as well as protections for religious groups, the LGBTQ+ community, and people with disabilities. Entering the 2000s, the focus shifted toward "Diversity" as a corporate necessity, where companies recognized that a varied workforce was essential for providing equal opportunities regardless of background. In the most recent era (2010s–2020s), the movements of #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter have pushed the framework further into "Equity" and "Inclusion," urging organizations to not just hire diverse talent but to address systemic social injustices and create environments where all employees can meaningfully participate.

Frameworks of Workplace DEI: Maturity Models and Implementation

Looking at ways to incorporate workplace DEI, the DEI Maturity Model stands out as one strategic framework used to assess an organization's progress in fostering a diverse and inclusive

⁷ ILO, "Resolution Concerning Inequalities and the World of Work," 2021, <https://www.ilo.org/media/231126/download>.

⁸ Julie Kratz, "The Little Known History Of DEI And Why It's Critical To Its Survival," Forbes, December 29, 2024, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/juliekratz/2024/12/29/history-of-dei-why-it-matters-for-the-future/>.

environment. The model is typically categorized into five distinct stages: Aware, Compliant, Tactical, Integrated, and Sustainable. According to research highlighted by the *Harvard Business Review* and others, organizations often begin at the Aware stage, where the importance of DEI is recognized but not yet acted upon, or the Compliant stage, where efforts are strictly reactive and focused on meeting legal requirements to avoid litigation. As organizations mature, they move into the Tactical phase, implementing isolated initiatives like grassroots employee groups, before reaching the Integrated stage, where DEI is embedded into the broader business strategy and leadership takes accountability. The final stage, Sustainable, represents a best-in-class culture where inclusion is ingrained in the organization's DNA, resilient to leadership changes, and continuously improving through data-driven insights.⁹

Organizations fit into this model by using it as a diagnostic tool to pinpoint their current standing and identify gaps between their intentions and actual impact. For instance, a company may have strong recruitment diversity (Tactical) but lack the inclusive culture to retain that talent (Integrated). By mapping their status, leaders can shift from a reactive "check-the-box" mentality to a proactive strategy that treats DEI as a core business driver rather than a peripheral HR function. This progression often requires a shift in mindset: moving from viewing diversity as a problem to be managed (Compliance) to seeing it as a competitive asset that drives innovation and market relevance.

Implementing DEI effectively requires a multi-pronged approach that moves beyond generic statements to concrete, measurable actions. Key methods include establishing Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) to provide community and feedback loops for underrepresented groups, and conducting pay equity audits to ensure fair compensation across demographics. Furthermore, Inclusive Hiring Practices, such as blinding resumes to remove identifying information and using diverse interview panels, are one way to reduce unconscious bias at the entry point. Training is another critical pillar, but some experts

⁹ Ella F. Washington, "The Five Stages of DEI Maturity," *Harvard Business Review*, Harvard Business Review, November 1, 2022, <https://hbr.org/2022/11/the-five-stages-of-dei-maturity>

caution that one-off sessions are insufficient; instead, organizations should focus on continuous education regarding unconscious bias and inclusive leadership, paired with clear metrics to track progress and hold management accountable for results.

Government Involvement in DEI

Norway

To observe an example of government choosing to lead an intervention in workplace demographics, we turn to the case of Norway, which became the first country to forcefully address male dominance in the corporate sector through statutory regulation.¹⁰ In 2003, the Norwegian parliament adopted a law requiring the boards of public limited companies, as well as state and inter-municipal companies, to be composed of at least 40 per cent of each gender. Although the policy was initially met with fierce opposition from the business community and political right, it was championed effectively by the Conservative Minister of Trade and Industry, Ansgar Gabrielsen. The regulation was fully implemented for public limited companies by 2008, resulting in a rapid increase in female board representation from just 5 per cent in 2002 to the mandated 40 per cent.

The efficacy of this policy was largely due to the strategic decision to house the regulation within Company Legislation rather than the Gender Equality Act, which allowed for the application of strict enforcement mechanisms. The law carries severe sanctions for non-compliance: companies that fail to meet the gender balance requirement face a tiered system of warnings and fines that ultimately leads to the forced dissolution of the company. Because the consequences of non-compliance are so harsh, they are rarely needed, as corporations engage in "anticipatory compliance," recruiting women to their boards well before the deadlines. Furthermore, the policy generated positive feedback, where support for quotas

¹⁰ Mari Teigen, "Gender Quotas for Corporate Boards: A Qualified Success in Changing Male Dominance in the Boardroom," in *Successful Public Policy in the Nordic Countries* (Oxford University Press Oxford, 2022), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780192856296.003.0007>.

among the business elite actually increased significantly after the law was implemented and they experienced the results.

However, the Norwegian model also highlights the limitations of quota-based frameworks and many methods of incorporating DEI, specifically regarding the lack of a "ripple effect" beyond the boardroom. While the policy succeeded programmatically in changing board composition, it has not significantly impacted the executive ranks; women remain poorly represented among CEOs, comprising only 14 per cent of chief executives in the 200 largest Norwegian companies. Additionally, the progress in public limited companies did not spread to private limited liability companies (which were not covered by the quota), where female board membership has stagnated. Ultimately, while Norway's approach successfully shattered the glass ceiling for corporate directors and inspired similar legislation across Europe, in countries like France, Spain, and Iceland, it demonstrates that board quotas alone may be insufficient to if countries want to achieve gender balance in top management positions.

India

India's primary intervention for gender equity in governance is the 73rd Constitutional Amendment Act of 1992, which legally mandated that at least one-third (33%) of all seats in Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) be reserved for women.¹¹ This reservation policy, which also applies to the offices of chairpersons on a rotational basis and includes specific quotas for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes, was designed to transfer power to the grassroots level and has successfully ushered more than 1.5 million women into positions of local leadership. Recognizing that legislative mandates alone cannot ensure qualitative participation, the government has implemented supplementary support systems, such as the Pradhan Mantri Mahila Shakti Kendra scheme, to empower rural women through community

¹¹ Fatema Nargis Choudhury, "Importance of 73rd Amendment Act as A Catalyst for Women Empowerment in India : An Analytical Study," *Ilkogretim Online* 20, no. 2 (2021): 3954–3959, <https://ilkogretim-online.org/index.php/pub/article/view/1677>.

involvement. Furthermore, the Ministry of Women and Child Development conducts specific training programs for elected women representatives to educate them on PRI functioning and participatory planning, helping them identify their potential as agents of change rather than passive participants.

The impact of this structural inclusion has been transformative, with female leaders effectively mobilizing resources to construct schools, healthcare centers, and infrastructure projects that improve community quality of life. Their leadership has notably addressed critical issues such as drinking water, hygiene, and family planning, while also leading to a substantial decline in domestic violence as women representatives take proactive steps against such atrocities. Despite these successes, the government faces ongoing challenges in ensuring these representatives are not merely proxies for male family members or invited simply to complete a quorum. To counter obstacles like illiteracy and manipulation by local power-brokers, current strategies emphasize the urgent need for improved female literacy in rural areas and systematic awareness programs to help women genuinely understand and discharge their administrative responsibilities.

United States

The landscape of workplace Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in the United States has undergone a significant transformation following the Supreme Court's 2023 ruling in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard/UNC*.¹² While this ruling technically banned affirmative action, specifically race-conscious admissions, in higher education, it has created a profound "chilling effect" across the private sector, altering how corporations approach workforce diversity. Legal experts and civil rights groups note that while the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) maintains that private-sector DEI initiatives remain lawful so long as they do not violate Title VII of the Civil Rights

¹² Ishan K. Bhabha et al., "One Year Later: The Implications of SFFA for Corporate America," The Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance, 2024, <https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2024/08/06/one-year-later-the-implications-of-sffa-for-corporate-america/>.

Act, the ruling has emboldened legal challenges against corporate diversity programs. As a result, many major U.S. employers are shifting away from explicit "affirmative action" style metrics or quotas, which are now viewed as legally vulnerable, moving instead toward broader, "race-neutral" strategies to avoid litigation from conservative legal advocacy groups.

Simultaneously, the political climate under the influence of the "Make America Great Again" (MAGA) movement and President Trump's rhetoric has deeply polarized public views on workplace equity.¹³ Trump-aligned political figures have increasingly framed DEI initiatives as "woke ideology" or "reverse discrimination," leading to the introduction of executive orders and state-level legislation (notably in Florida and Texas) that restrict DEI funding and programming in public institutions.¹⁴ Consequently, many U.S. corporations have entered a period of "quiet" diversity work, often scrubbing the term DEI from external communications and reclassifying these efforts under "merit" or "talent acquisition" to mitigate reputational risk while attempting to navigate a workforce that remains expectant of inclusive practices.

Conclusion

Efforts to advance Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in the workforce are framed by many as both a moral and economic priority, though the approach and even the premise remain contested in some political and legal contexts. While significant strides have been made through foundational ILO conventions and bold national interventions, ranging from Norway's corporate quotas to India's grassroots reservations, structural barriers and systemic bias persist, and there remains real debate over the appropriate role of the

¹³ The White House, "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Removes DEI From the Foreign Service," The White House, March 18, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/03/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-removes-dei-from-the-foreign-service/>.

¹⁴ Tracy Richelle High et al., "President Trump Acts to Roll Back DEI Initiatives," The Harvard Law School Forum on Corporate Governance, February 10, 2025, <https://corpgov.law.harvard.edu/2025/02/10/president-trump-acts-to-roll-back-dei-initiatives/>.

state and employers in addressing them. The current landscape is marked by a tension between the documented advantages many stakeholders associate with inclusive maturity models and the rising tide of political and legal resistance seen in major economies. In the United States, some argue DEI measures can conflict with merit-based hiring, national legal frameworks, or social cohesion. Consequently, the challenge facing this committee is moving beyond a narrow “compliance” approach toward “sustainable” integration that is effective, lawful, and adaptable across diverse political contexts and labour markets. Delegates must now navigate these disparities to craft solutions that do not simply mandate diversity, but address exclusion where it exists while respecting differing national priorities, ensuring progress toward decent work for all.

Questions for delegates to consider:

1. How can resolutions aiming for equality in the workplace be enforced?
2. How can we balance the desire to “just pick the best candidate” with ensuring DEI practices are employed?
3. Should governments work to get more people interested in employing DEI in their workplace?
4. How can DEI quotas be implemented without causing additional surges of discrimination?
5. Has your country implemented laws related to workplace DEI? If so, were they effective?

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